

The Five Hindrances (Nivarana)

by

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NAMO TASSA BHAGAVATO ARAHATO SAMMASAMBUDDHASSA

The major obstacles to successful meditation and liberating insight take the form of one or more of the Five Hindrances. The whole practice leading to Enlightenment can be well expressed as the effort to overcome the Five Hindrances, at first suppressing them temporarily in order to experience Jhana and Insight, and then overcoming them permanently through the full development of the Noble Eightfold Path.

So, what are these Five Hindrances? They are:

KAMACCHANDA : Sensory Desire
VYAPADA : Ill Will
THINA-MIDDHA: Sloth and Torpor
UDDHACCA-KUKKUCCA : Restlessness and Remorse
VICIKICCHA : Doubt

1. Sensory desire refers to that particular type of wanting that seeks for happiness through the five senses of sight, sound, smell, taste and physical feeling. It specifically excludes any aspiration for happiness through the sixth sense of mind alone.

In its extreme form, sensory desire is an obsession to find pleasure in such things as sexual intimacy, good food or fine music. But it also includes the desire to replace irritating or even painful five-sense experiences with pleasant ones, i.e. the desire for sensory comfort.

The Lord Buddha compared sensory desire to taking out a loan. Any pleasure one experiences through these five senses must be repaid through the unpleasantness of separation, loss or hungry emptiness which follow relentlessly when the pleasure is used up. As with any loan, there is also the matter of interest and thus, as the Lord Buddha said, the pleasure is small compared to the suffering repaid.

In meditation, one transcends sensory desire for the period by letting go of concern for this body and its five sense activity. Some imagine that the five senses are there to serve and protect the body, but the truth is that the body is there to serve the five senses as they play in the world ever seeking delight. Indeed, the Lord Buddha once said, "**The five senses ARE the world**" and to leave the world, to enjoy the other worldly bliss of Jhana, one must give up for a time ALL concern for the body and its five senses.

When sensory desire is transcended, the mind of the meditator has no interest in the promise of pleasure or even comfort with this body. The body disappears and the five senses all switch off. The mind becomes calm and free to look within. The difference between the five sense activity and its transcendence is like the difference between looking out of a window and looking in a mirror. The mind that is free from five sense activity can truly look within and see its real nature. Only from that can wisdom arise as to what we are, from where and why?!

2. Ill will refers to the desire to punish, hurt or destroy. It includes sheer hatred of a person, or even a situation, and it can generate so much energy that it is both seductive and addictive. At the time, it always appears justified for such is its power that it easily corrupts our ability to judge fairly. It also includes ill will towards oneself, otherwise known as guilt, which denies oneself any possibility of happiness. In meditation, ill will can appear as dislike towards the meditation object itself, rejecting it so that one's attention is forced to wander elsewhere.

The Lord Buddha likened ill will to being sick. Just as sickness denies one the freedom and happiness of health, so ill will denies one the freedom and happiness of peace.

Ill will is overcome by applying Metta, loving kindness. When it is ill will towards a person, Metta teaches one to see more in that person than all that which hurts you, to understand why that person hurt you (often because they were hurting intensely themselves), and encourages one to put aside one's own pain to look with compassion on the other. But if this is more than one can do, Metta to oneself leads one to refuse to dwell in ill will to that person, so as to stop them from hurting you further with the memory of those deeds. Similarly, if it is ill will towards oneself, Metta sees more than one's own faults, can understand one's own faults, and finds the courage to forgive them, learn from their lesson and let them go. Then, if it is ill will towards the meditation object (often the reason why a meditator cannot

reason and let them go. Then, if it is ill will towards the meditation object (often the reason why a meditator cannot find peace) Metta embraces the meditation object with care and delight. For example, just as a mother has a natural Metta towards her child, so a meditator can look on their breath, say, with the very same quality of caring attention. Then it will be just as unlikely to lose the breath through forgetfulness as it is unlikely for a mother to forget her baby in the shopping mall, and it would be just as improbable to drop the breath for some distracting thought as it is for a distracted mother to drop her baby! When ill will is overcome, it allows lasting relationships with other people, with oneself and, in meditation, a lasting, enjoyable relationship with the meditation object, one that can mature into the full embrace of absorption.

3. Sloth and torpor refers to that heaviness of body and dullness of mind which drag one down into disabling inertia and thick depression. The Lord Buddha compared it to being imprisoned in a cramped, dark cell, unable to move freely in the bright sunshine outside. In meditation, it causes weak and intermittent mindfulness which can even lead to falling asleep in meditation without even realising it!

Sloth and torpor is overcome by rousing energy. Energy is always available but few know how to turn on the switch, as it were. Setting a goal, a reasonable goal, is a wise and effective way to generate energy, as is deliberately developing interest in the task at hand. A young child has a natural interest, and consequent energy, because its world is so new. Thus, if one can learn to look at one's life, or one's meditation, with a 'beginner's mind' one can see ever new angles and fresh possibilities which keep one distant from sloth and torpor, alive and energetic. Similarly, one can develop delight in whatever one is doing by training one's perception to see the beautiful in the ordinary, thereby generating the interest which avoids the half-death that is sloth and torpor.

The mind has two main functions, '*doing*' and '*knowing*'. The way of meditation is to calm the '*doing*' to complete tranquillity while maintaining the '*knowing*'. Sloth and torpor occur when one carelessly calms both the '*doing*' and the '*knowing*', unable to distinguish between them.

Sloth and torpor is a common problem which can creep up and smother one slowly. A skilful meditator keeps a sharp look-out for the first signs of sloth and torpor and is thus able to spot its approach and take evasive action before it's too late. Like coming to a fork in a road, one can take that mental path leading away from sloth and torpor. Sloth and torpor is an unpleasant state of body and mind, too stiff to leap into the bliss of Jhana and too blinded to spot any insights. In short, it is a complete waste of precious time.

4. Restlessness refers to a mind which is like a monkey, always swinging on to the next branch, never able to stay long with anything. It is caused by the fault-finding state of mind which cannot be satisfied with things as they are, and so has to move on to the promise of something better, forever just beyond.

The Lord Buddha compared restlessness to being a slave, continually having to jump to the orders of a tyrannical boss who always demands perfection and so never lets one stop.

Restlessness is overcome by developing contentment, which is the opposite of fault-finding. One learns the simple joy of being satisfied with little, rather than always wanting more. One is grateful for this moment, rather than picking out its deficiencies. For instance, in meditation restlessness is often the impatience to move quickly on to the next stage. The fastest progress, though is achieved by those who are content with the stage they are on now. It is the deepening of that contentment that ripens into the next stage. So be careful of 'wanting to get on with it' and instead learn how to rest in appreciative contentment. That way, the '*doing*' disappears and the meditation blossoms.

Remorse refers to a specific type of restlessness which is the kammic effect of one's misdeeds. The only way to overcome remorse, the restlessness of a bad conscience, is to purify one's virtue and become kind, wise and gentle. It is virtually impossible for the immoral or the self indulgent to make deep progress in meditation.

5. Doubt refers to the disturbing inner questions at a time when one should be silently moving deeper. Doubt can question one's own ability "Can I do This?", or question the method "Is this the right way?", or even question the meaning "What is this?". It should be remembered that such questions are obstacles to meditation because they are asked at the wrong time and thus become an intrusion, obscuring one's clarity.

The Lord Buddha likened doubt to being lost in a desert, not recognising any landmarks.

Such doubt is overcome by gathering clear instructions, having a good map, so that one can recognise the subtle landmarks in the unfamiliar territory of deep meditation and so know which way to go. Doubt in one's ability is overcome by nurturing self confidence with a good teacher. A meditation teacher is like a coach who convinces the sports team that they can succeed. The Lord Buddha stated that one can, one will, reach Jhana and Enlightenment if one carefully and patiently follows the instructions. The only uncertainty is 'when!' Experience also overcomes doubt about one's ability and also doubt whether this is the right path. As one realised for oneself the beautiful stages of the path, one discovers that one is indeed capable of the very highest, and that this is the path that leads one there.

The doubt that takes the form of constant assessing "Is this Jhana?" "How am I going?", is overcome by realising that such questions are best left to the end, to the final couple of minutes of the meditation. A jury only makes its judgement at the end of the trial, when all the evidence has been presented. Similarly, a skilful meditator pursues a

judgement at the end of the trial, when all the evidence has been presented. Similarly, a skilful meditator pursues a silent gathering of evidence, reviewing it only at the end to uncover its meaning.

The end of doubt, in meditation, is described by a mind which has full trust in the silence, and so doesn't interfere with any inner speech. Like having a good chauffeur, one sits silently on the journey out of trust in the driver.

Any problem which arises in meditation will be one of these Five Hindrances, or a combination. So, if one experiences any difficulty, use the scheme of the Five Hindrances as a 'check list' to identify the main problem. Then you will know the appropriate remedy, apply it carefully, and go beyond the obstacle into deeper meditation.

When the Five Hindrances are fully overcome, there is no barrier between the meditator and the bliss of Jhana. Therefore, the certain test that these Five Hindrances are really overcome is the ability to access Jhana.

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